

GUIDELINES FOR MUTUAL AID GROUP MEMBERS

People group together for many purposes: to learn, to accomplish a task, to defend themselves, to advocate a cause, to solve problems, for emotional support, etc. In varying degrees, group members influence one another through their behaviors (especially communications) in the group. Further, the influencing behaviors of group members can usually be diagnosed and explained according to certain principles or "rules". Typically, most individuals do not have a very clear idea about the rules and behaviors which either help or hinder group purposes

It is my belief, after some years of group study and group leading, that groups function better as a whole (meet their purposes) and individual members benefit more from their participation in groups when the rules or principles of operation are stated and made accessible to all. In order to contribute constructively and to benefit from group life, one should know which behaviors inhibit group purposes and which behaviors support group purposes. The aim of this paper is to identify certain important behaviors and state guidelines for members of the Mutual Aid Group.

Mutual Aid Groups are formed for three purposes: (1) aiding members to cope with their immediate social reality (problems of daily living); (2) aiding members to learn new and more gratifying behaviors; and (3) building each member's self-image and pride.

Mutual Aid Groups are a type of self-help group in that they do not depend upon professional leadership for their operation. A professional may initiate or support such groups and may teach group members about the rules and behaviors which make groups work or which block group work. However, the work and progress of the group is in the hands of all of the group members.

At their best, Mutual Aid Groups are a support system where individual members can improve their ability to deal with emotions and emotional situations, where they can discuss expectable life problems and their possible solutions, and where each person can develop a more coherent view of himself and of the world in which he lives. Group members also learn how to give and receive personal assistance in constructive ways.

At its worst a Mutual Aid Group is the occasion for much arguing, blaming, negativity, poor listening, ill-timed advice, aimless chatter, and even destructive verbal abuse. Often the difference between the best and the worst can be largely explained by the extent to which members demonstrate three general principles: honesty, responsibility and caring.

Honesty means: "How truthful am I with myself and with others?" "Am I inclined to tell it like it is, or do I tend to smooth things over, tell others only what I think they would like to hear, and lie to myself about myself?" "Am I believable because of my realness, or am I merely clever with words?"

Responsibility means: "To what extent do I carry out my commitments?" "Do I promise more than I can come through with?" "In my relations with others do I have a reputation for being reliable and trustworthy or neglectful and undependable?"

Caring means: "To what extent do I offer love and show my concern for other people who are important or significant to me?" "Do I just stand by and 'look on' when someone needs help?" "Does my caring include showing respect to others although they may be very different from me?" "Do I care enough to refrain from meddling in other people's affairs, just so that my own self-interest is served?" "Do I care enough just to 'be with' someone else in situations when there doesn't seem to be much which can be done in the way of action?"

Honesty, responsibility and caring are the foundation principles of Mutual Aid Groups and they are also goals toward which all group members can work. Most people need guidance in carrying out and improving their ability to demonstrate these three principles.

The following guidelines are specific rules which can be used to support the three general principles. No rule is sacred and completely applicable at all times. Nevertheless, rules do guide individuals to make constructive contributions to the group's operation and purposes. They also help members to get benefits from their group participation. Each "rule" is in the form of an agreement not to perform certain behaviors. Each one is a small contract which can be used to identify and eliminate behaviors which have a demonstrable negative effect both on individual learning and benefit and on group purpose.

1. I agree that I won't interrupt. I will do my best to hear the other person out. This will usually clarify the situation and will make him(her) feel better. I acknowledge that I can only understand what another is saying by listening carefully without interrupting or "butting in".
2. I agree that I won't blame. Blaming rarely improves any situation and usually worsens matters by causing resentment, guilt, defensiveness and provoking counter-attacks.
3. I agree that I won't gossip. This means that I will not talk about other people in their absence.
4. I agree that I won't "sub-group". A common example of sub-grouping is when several members of a group start up a private conversation, whisper to each other, or simply exchange "knowing", secretive glances. Another type of sub-grouping is meeting with another member or members outside of group meetings and discussing issues which are the concern of all members of the group. At worst, this is discussing what is "wrong" with the group or planning "sabotage" in outside meetings. Remember that improvement nearly always starts with changing one's own behavior while in-group.
5. I agree that I won't "yes...but". This phrase indicates that the speaker is resisting whatever it is that he has just been told. The "yes...but" specialist is about to justify, defend, blame others, disavow responsibility, avoid accountability, or manipulate the situation. It is much better, when confronted with an uncomfortable piece of information about one's self or one's behavior, to honestly try to find out just what part you did play-- and then take responsibility. Period!
6. I agree that I won't argue. There is an ancient saying: "A wise man listens, a clever man talks and a stupid man argues". If you are challenged or caught off-base, try saying "thank you, I did not see what I was doing". This will seldom start an argument. At the very least try to understand what you are being challenged about. If you think that the other's observation is really unwarranted, then the place to iron it out is in the group where other members can help keep the discussion honest.
7. I agree that I won't mind-read. Instead of diagnosing or guessing what another person is thinking or feeling, I will let him(her) state his(her) own position and take responsibility for having done so. I won't try to second-guess others and I don't expect them to second-guess me.
8. I agree that I won't "tit...for...tat". When I am challenged by someone it is better to accept the challenge (assuming that it is valid) and try to change my behavior than to retort by attacking or pointing out some shortcoming of the challenger.
9. I agree that I won't come out sideways. When I feel negative emotions of anger, resentment, jealousy, depression, etc., I will try to express my feelings in a straight-forward manner rather than "coming out sideways" in the form of sarcasm, wisecracks, putdowns or by using other types of hostile, verbal abuse.

10. I agree that I won't play "word games". Language is man's most important gift, yet he often abuses it by playing any one of a great number of deceitful or misleading games. Some of the most frequent are:
- (a) out and out lying,
 - (b) being evasive,
 - (c) insisting on "correct" definitions (the "define your terms approach"),
 - (d) using abstract language to discuss concrete problems,
 - (e) using polite expressions as a substitute for telling it like it is,
 - (f) bringing up trivial or even non-existent problems rather than coming to grips with something really important in one's life,
 - (g) talking out of both sides of one's mouth,
 - (h) narrating: going on endlessly about a problem for the umpteenth time without showing any action toward solving it,
 - (i) ping-pong: ignoring what the previous speaker was talking about and starting a new topic each time you manage to seize the conversation.
 - (j) introducing hypothetical situations instead of sticking to real events and problems ("What would you do if.....?").

In addition to these ten "I won'ts" there are eight ground rules which can give further guidance to group members. They are:

1. If I am unable to attend a group meeting, I will notify some other group member who will in turn notify the group as a whole of my absence and the reasons for it.
2. Except by pre-meeting arrangement, I will stay the entire length of the meeting. However, if the meeting runs over its allotted time, I realize I am free to leave without further explanation. If I arbitrarily "walk out" of a group in the middle of a conflict or problem discussion, I accept that this is, in effect, my resignation from the group and I may re-enter only after negotiation and permission of the group at the next scheduled meeting.
3. I will accept the role of group chairman on a rotating basis, one meeting at a time. The chairman has three responsibilities: (a) to start discussion by saying something like: "Who has an issue or problem you would like to deal with today", or starting a "round" so that each person has the opportunity to state what his situation is right now, or some other starting tactic; (b) keeping track if members who want to talk are getting a chance to; and (c) closing the meeting by initiating a final (brief) round. This helps to finish up business and ensures that all pertinent reactions are revealed to the whole group. The chairman is not responsible for seeing that discussion is carried on after the initial opening and is never responsible for determining what is talked about. These responsibilities are shared by all members.
4. I accept responsibility for speaking up when I have something to say rather than sitting around with a blank look on my face. I understand that I can use any language which I wish to use in the group without fear of being corrected and I can use non-word sounds such as groaning, yelling and crying.

5. I accept that I am subject to immediate expulsion from the group for either one of the following reasons:
 - (a) Use of physical violence toward others or objects, or threat of violence,
 - (b) Showing up at group meetings intoxicated, or under the influence of other drugs,
6. I realize that I or any other group member can call a special group meeting in the event of a crisis or seriously upsetting event or problem.
7. I realize that I am free and encouraged to telephone, meet with, and help other group members between regular group meetings whenever the need arises.
8. I agree to read and study about groups and how they work and to attend, from time-to-time, theory-discussion meetings for the purpose of examining and discussing the theory and practice of groups. Such meetings are held separate from regular Mutual Aid Group meetings. The instructor is mainly responsible for providing reading materials and study suggestions and for directing theory-discussion meetings. However, group members may also contribute appropriate readings and study suggestions.

RVP/lm